The Flying Ship

The Flying Ship

Russian Folk Tale

Illustrations by Mikhail Belomlinsky

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Россия, 1987
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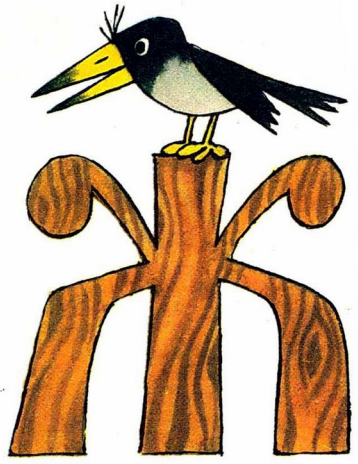


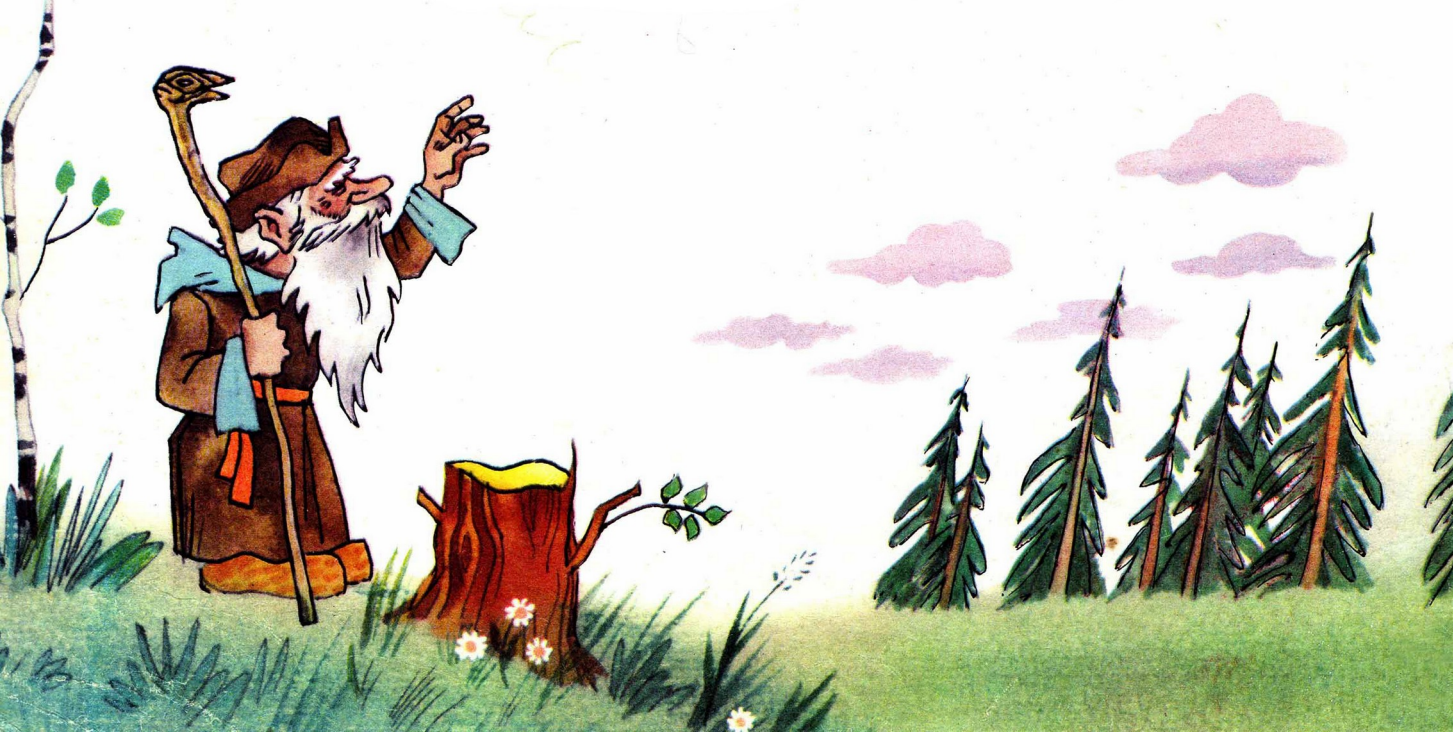
There was once upon a time an old man and an old woman, and they had three sons; two were clever, but the third was a fool. The old woman loved the first two, and quite spoiled them, but the latter was always hardly treated. They heard that a writing had come from the Tsar which said, "Whoever builds a ship that can fly, to him will I give my daughter the Tsarevna to wife." The elder brothers resolved to go and seek their fortune, and they begged a blessing of their parents.

The mother got ready their things for the journey, and gave them something to eat on the way, and a flask of wine. And the fool began to beg them to send him off too. His mother told him he should not go. "Whither would you go, fool?" said she; "why, the wolves would devour you!" But the fool was always singing the same refrain: "I will go, I will go!" His mother saw that she could do nothing with him, so she gave him a piece of dry bread and a flask of water, and quickly shoved him out of the house.

The fool went and went, and at last he met an old man. They greeted each other. The old man asked the fool, "Whither are you going?"–"Look now!" said the fool, "the Tsar has promised to give his daughter to him who shall make a flying ship!"–"And can you then make such a ship?"–"No, I cannot, but they"ll make it for me somewhere."–"And where is that somewhere?"–"God only knows."–"Well, in that case, sit down here; rest and eat a bit. Take out what you have got in your knapsack."–"Nay, it is such stuff that I am ashamed to show it to people."–"Nonsense! Take it out! What God has given is quite good enough to be eaten."

The fool undid his knapsack, and could scarcely believe his eyes–there, instead of the dry crust of bread, lay white rolls and divers savoury meats, and he gave of it to the old man. So they ate together, and the old man said to the fool, “Go into the wood, right up to the first tree, cross yourself thrice, and strike the tree with your axe, then fall with your face to the ground and wait till you are aroused. Then you will see before you a ship quite ready; sit in it and fly wherever you like, and gather up everything you meet on your road.”

So our fool blessed the old man, took leave of him, and went into the wood. He went up to the first tree and did exactly as he had been commanded; he crossed himself three times, struck the tree with his axe, fell with his face to the ground, and went to sleep. In a little while some one or other awoke him. The fool rose up, and saw the ship quite ready, and without thinking long about it, he sat in it, and the ship flew up into the air.



It flew and flew, and look!–there on the road below, a man was lying with his ear to the damp earth. “Good-day, uncle!”–“Good-day.”–“What are you doing?”–“I am listening to what is going on in the world.”–“Take a seat in the ship beside me.”

The man did not like to refuse, so he sat in the ship, and they flew on further. They flew and flew, and look!–a man was coming along hopping on one leg, with the other leg tied tightly to his ear.

“Good-day, uncle; what are you hopping on one leg for?”–“Why, if I were to untie the other I should stride half round the world at a single stride.”–“Come and sit with us.” The man sat down, and they flew on. They flew and flew, and look!–a man was standing with a gun and taking aim, but at what they could not see. “Good-day, uncle; at what are you aiming? Not even a bird is to be seen.”–“What! I am shooting at short range. I could hit bird or beast at a distance of one hundred leagues. That”s what I call shooting!”–“Sit down with us.”

This man also sat with them, and they flew on further. They flew and flew, and look!–a man was carrying on his back a whole sack-load of bread. “Good-day, uncle; whither are you going?”–“I am going,” he said, “to get some bread for dinner.”–“But you”ve got a whole sack-load on your back already!”–“That! Why I should think nothing of eating all that at a single mouthful.”–“Come and sit with us.” The Gobbler sat in the ship, and they went flying on further. They flew and they flew, and look!–a man was walking round a lake. “Good-day, uncle; what are you looking for?”–“I want to drink, but I can find no water.”–“But there”s a whole lake before you, why don”t you drink of it?”–“That! Why that water would not be more than a mouthful to me!”–“Then come and sit with us.”

He sat down, and again they flew on. They flew and flew, and look!–a man was walking in the forest, and on his shoulders was a bundle of wood. “Good-day, uncle; why are you dragging about wood in the forest?”–“But this is not common wood.”–“What sort is it then?”–“It is of such a sort that if you scatter it, a whole army will spring up.”–“Sit down with us then.” He sat down with them, and they flew on further. They flew and flew, and look!–a man was carrying a sack of straw.

“Good-day, uncle; whither are you carrying that straw?”–“To the village.”–“Is there little straw in the village then?”–“Nay, but this straw is of such a kind that if you scatter it on the hottest summer day, cold will immediately set in with snow and frost.”–“Won”t you sit with us, then?”–“Thank you, I will.”

Soon they flew into the Tsar”s courtyard. The Tsar was sitting at table just then; he saw the flying ship, was much surprised, and sent out his servant to ask who was flying on that ship.

The servant went to the ship and looked, and brought back word to the Tsar that ”twas but a single, miserable little muzhik1 who was flying the ship. The Tsar fell a-thinking. He did not relish the idea of giving his daughter to a simple muzhik, and began to consider how he could rid him of this wretched son-in-law for a whole year. And so he thought, “I'll give him many grievous tasks to do.” So he immediately sent out to the fool with the command to get him, by the time the imperial meal was over, living and singing water. Now, at the very time when the Tsar was giving this command to his servant, the first comrade whom the fool had met (that is to say, the one who was listening to what was going on in the world) heard what the Tsar said, and told it to the fool. “What shall I do now?” said the fool. “Why, if I search for a year, and for my whole life too, I shall never find such water.”–“Don”t be afraid,” said Swift-of-foot to him, “I'll manage it for you.”

The servant came and made known the Tsar"s command. "Say I'll fetch it," replied the fool, and his comrade untied his other leg from his ear, ran off, and in a twinkling he drew from the end of the world some of the living and singing water.

"I must make haste and return presently," said he, and he sat down under a water-mill and went to sleep. The Tsar"s dinner was drawing to a close, and still he did not turn up though they were all waiting, so that those on board the ship grew uneasy. The first comrade bent down to the earth and listened. "Oh ho! so you are asleep beneath the mill, are you?" Then the marksman seized his gun, shot into the mill, and awoke Swift-of-foot with his shooting. Swift-of-foot set off running, and in a moment he had brought the water. The Tsar had not yet risen from the table, and his command could not therefore have been more exactly fulfilled. But it was all to no purpose, another task had to be imposed.

The Tsar bade them say to the fool, “Come now, as you are so smart, show what you”re made of! You and your comrades must eat at one meal twenty roast oxen and twenty large measures of baked bread.” The first comrade heard and told this to the fool.

The fool was terrified, and said, “Why, I can”t eat even one whole loaf at one meal!”–“Don”t be afraid,” said Gobbler, “that will be very little for me.” The servant came and delivered the Tsar”s command.

“Good!” said the fool, “let us have it and we”ll eat it.” And they brought twenty roasted bullocks, and twenty measures of baked bread. Gobbler alone ate it all up. “Ugh!” he said, “precious little! they might have given us a little more.”

The Tsar bade them say to the fool that he must now drink forty barrels of wine, each barrel holding forty buckets. The first comrade of the fool heard these words, and told them to him beforehand. The fool was horrified. “Why, I could not drink a single bucketful,” said he.

“Don”t be frightened,” said the Drinker, “I'll drink for all; it will be little enough for me.” They poured out the forty barrels of wine; the Drinker came and drank the whole lot at one draught; he drank it right to the dregs, and said, “Ugh! little enough, too! I should have liked as much again.”

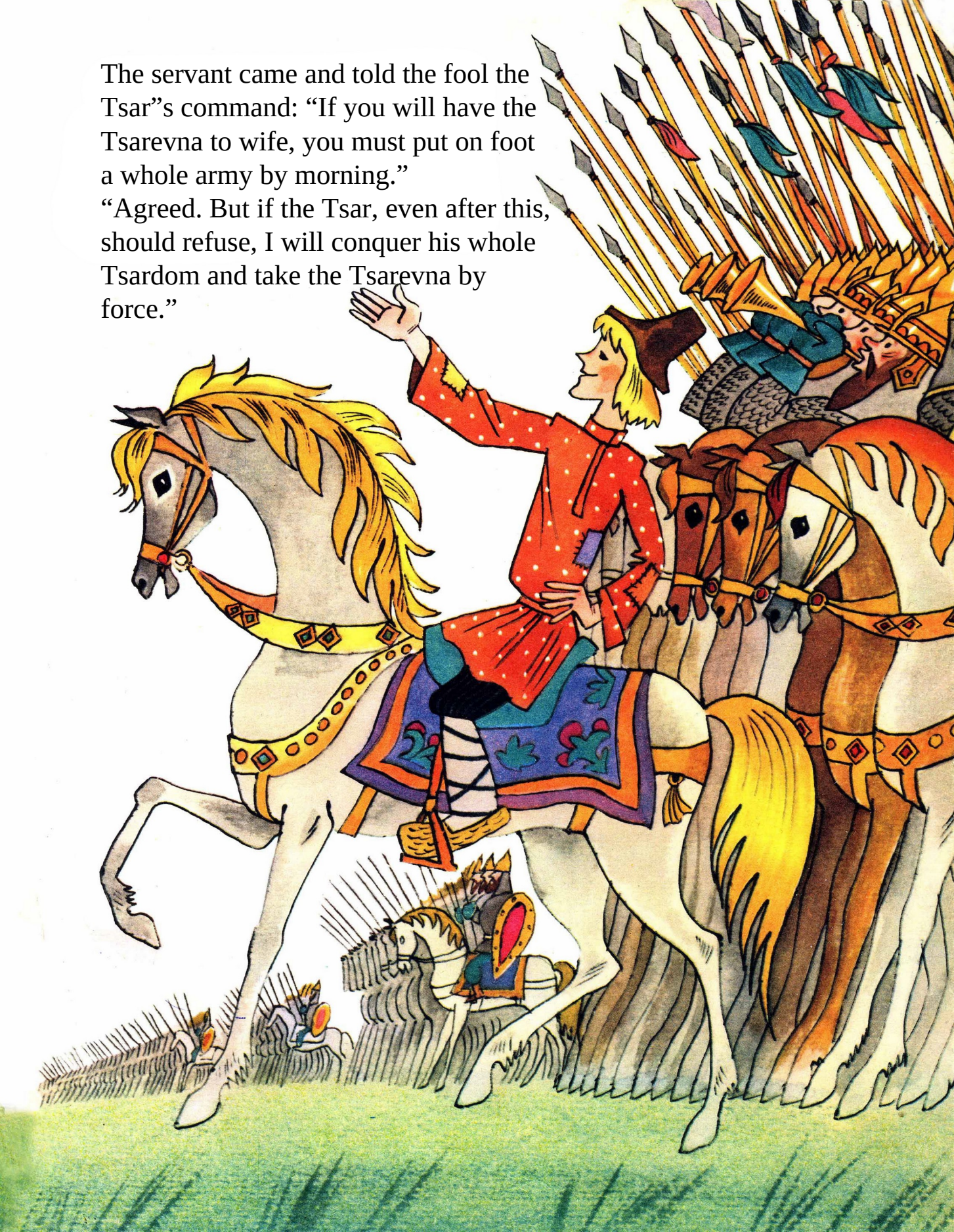
After that the Tsar commanded the fool to get ready for his wedding, and go to the bath-room to have a good wash. Now this bath-room was of cast-iron, and the Tsar commanded that it should be heated hotter than hot, that the fool might be suffocated therein in a single instant. So they heated the bath red-hot. The fool went to wash himself, and behind him came the muzhik with the straw. “I must straw the floor,” said he. They locked them both in the bath-room; the muzhik scattered the straw, and it became so cold that the fool was scarce able to wash himself properly, the water in the bath froze so hard. He crept up on the stove and there he passed the whole night.

In the morning they opened the bath, and they found the fool alive and well, lying on the stove and singing songs.

They brought word thereof to the Tsar. The Tsar was sore troubled, he did not know how to rid himself of the fool. He thought and thought, and commanded him to produce a whole army of his own devising. “How will a simple muzhik be able to form an army?” thought he; “he will certainly not be able to do that.” As soon as the fool heard of this he was much alarmed. “Now I am quite lost,” said he; “you have delivered me from my straits more than once, my friends, but it is plain that nothing can be done now.” “You”re a pretty fellow,” said the man with the bundle of wood; “why, you”ve clean forgotten me, haven”t you?”

The servant came and told the fool the Tsar"s command: "If you will have the Tsarevna to wife, you must put on foot a whole army by morning."

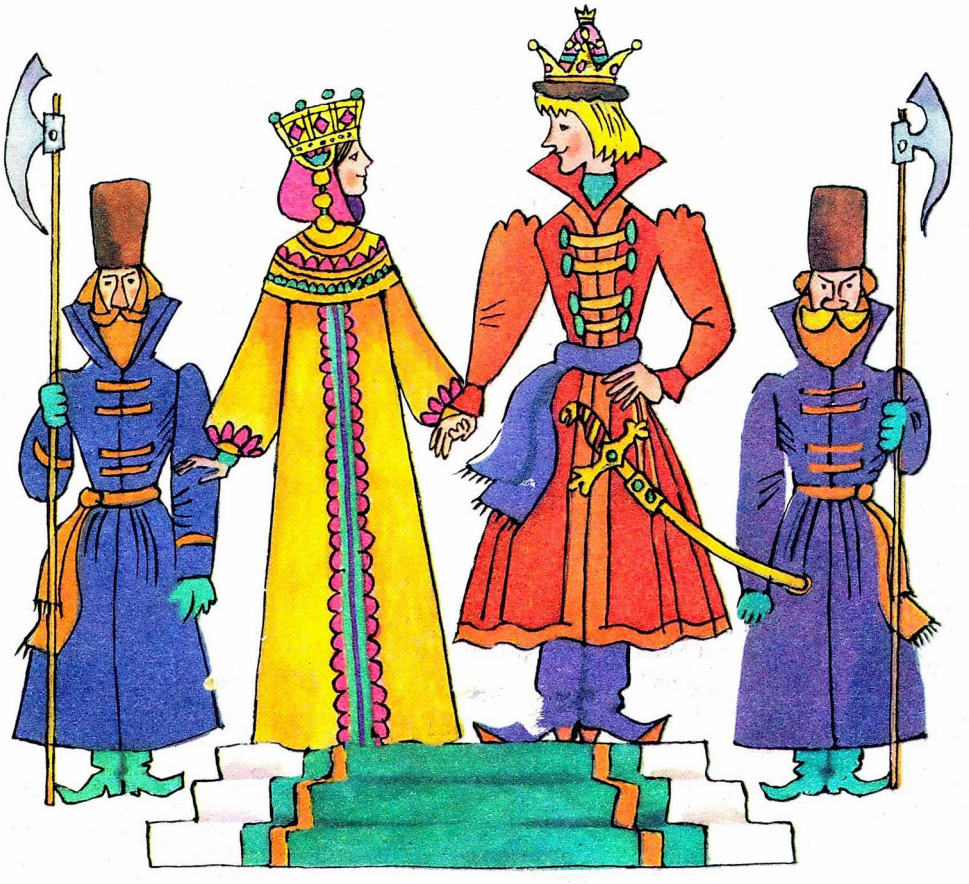
"Agreed. But if the Tsar, even after this, should refuse, I will conquer his whole Tsardom and take the Tsarevna by force."



At night the fool”s companion went out into the fields, took his bundle of wood, and began scattering the bundles of sticks in different directions–and immediately a countless army appeared, both horse and foot.

In the morning the Tsar saw it, and was terrified in his turn, and in all haste he sent to the fool precious ornaments and raiment, and bade them lead him to court and marry him to the Tsarevna. The fool attired himself in these costly ornaments, and they made him look handsomer than words can tell.

He appeared before the Tsar, wedded the Tsarevna, received a large wedding-gift, and became quite clever and witty. The Tsar and the Tsaritsa grew very fond of him, and the Tsarevna lived with him all her life, and loved him as the apple of her eye.



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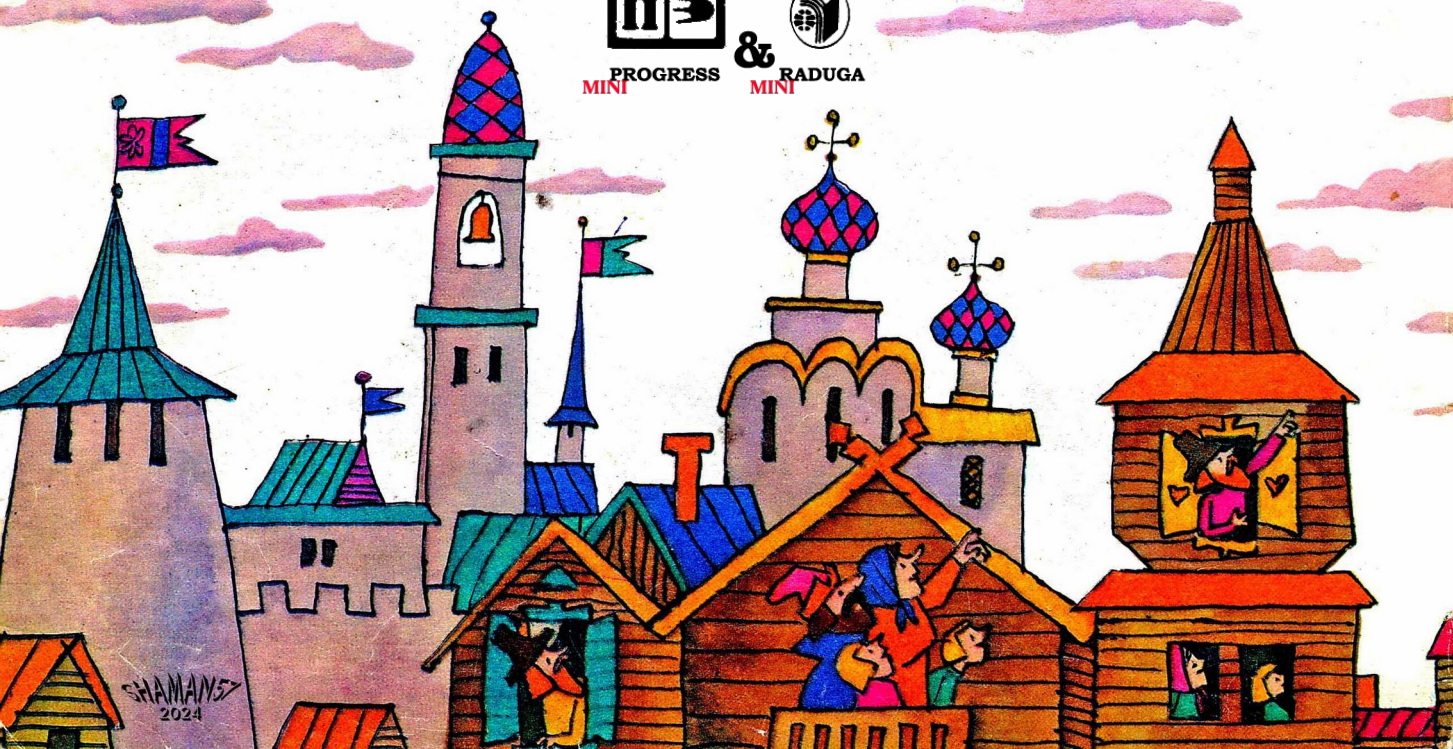
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